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ABSTRACT

Preschool can be an opportunity to emphasize literacy teaching and learning and to develop the role of "literacy as community," rather than being only kindergarten preparation. The results of two studies view children's literacy development as a dynamic, developmental process involving language, thought, and social interaction. In Meier's ongoing "Urban Study," conducted at an all-day, year-round child development center in northern California, questions are asked about literacy as community in an urban setting, ways to create an extra layer of literacy, and how literacy as community can contribute to early childhood program reform. The implementation of a bookbag program in this setting encouraged communication among teachers, students, and parents regarding program set-up, reading habits within the family, and literacy goals. A three-part session involving guided reading, group literacy activities, and independent reading appeared to promote an additional sense of literacy as community. Britsch's "Rural Study" analyzed two Head Start classrooms in a small midwestern town. The teachers, emphasizing the students' already acquired skills, aimed the program so that the children: (1) would become familiar with book concepts and tools; (2) talk openly, expressively, and comprehensibly, and (3) begin to build a base of social skills that would transfer to kindergarten. The teachers focused on inclusion, ownership, thinking processes, and stability to create an atmosphere that fostered those aims. (Contains 46 references.) (MT)

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BUILDING A LITERACY COMMUNITY: THE ROLE OF LITERACY AND SOCIAL PRACTICE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM REFORM

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> This is all my "E"s that I messed up. These are all my "A"s that I did. These are all my "B"s that I did, and they're good too.
>
> — Kamaal's dictation

Introduction

As an academic focus has moved down from first grade to kindergarten (Shepard, 1991), notions of what constitutes school success in the area of children's literacy development is now creeping into the preschool. In California and elsewhere, in order to improve reading achievement scores, there is a growing call for increased phonics instruction and attention to direct instruction in reading skill development from preschool to grade 3 (e.g. *Every Child a Reader: The Report of the California Reading Task Force*, 1995; *California Program Advisory*, 1996). This current academic emphasis also comes at a time when policy makers and others are calling for the expansion of high-quality preschool experiences for children and their families (Children's Defense Fund, 1996; Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades, 1996; National Education Goals Panel, 1995). In recommending early childhood intervention models and programs (Beatty, 1995; Vinovskis, 1993), policy makers point to the successes of such early childhood initiatives as Project Head Start (Zigler & Muenchow, 1992; Zigler & Styfco, 1994), the High/Scope Curriculum (Weikart & Schweinhart, 1993; Schweinhart et al, 1991; Epstein et al, 1996), and developmentally appropriate early childhood curricula and assessment measures (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1995).

In this paper, we present results from an ongoing project in an urban preschool (Meier's study) and a completed study in a rural Head Start classroom (Britsch's study). Both projects shift the focus away from notions of preschool as the site for early intervention and as a transition or readiness

stage before kindergarten. Instead, the projects emphasize the need for a continual and evolving emphasis on central aspects of literacy teaching and learning in early childhood settings, and in particular the role of "literacy as community" in the process of better understanding central factors influencing the quality of the collective literacy experiences between teachers, students, and families.

Rooted in the framework of literacy use as socially constructed and embedded in the social and cultural perspectives and practices of communities (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Heath, 1983), the projects view children's literacy development as a dynamic, developmental process involving language, thought, and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Bruner, 1996). As young children begin their early school years, their language and literacy experiences are intimately tied to varied social experiences and literacy use in the home, neighborhood, and street (Goodwin, 1990; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Heath, 1983). Children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, though, may experience differential access to cultural codes of literacy instruction in schools (Delpit, 1995), and in the resulting cultural conflict their varied literacy experiences and orientations may not be viewed as effective modes for school literacy learning (Cazden, 1988; Trueba, 1987).

To reconceptualize notions of effective literacy school success for students in diverse classrooms, and improve opportunities for literacy and school achievement, culturally-relevant teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Au & Jordan, 1981) incorporate students' community-based beliefs, traditions, and orientations toward classroom participation and academic work. This still expanding framework is also founded upon related notions of the powerful relationship between parental perspectives and community

empowerment in increasing student achievement (Delgado-Gaitan, 1996; Nieto, 1995), the influence of cultural frames of reference of students and teachers in classroom instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1994), and connections and missed connections between children's sociocultural resources for language and literacy involvement and the social and academic structures for school participation (Delpit, 1995).

Design and Method

The Urban Study

The project site is a state and federally-funded preschool in a working-class urban area in Northern California. The site is an all-day, year-round "child development center" serving one classroom of 30 three-year-olds and two classrooms of 60 four and five-year-olds. 92% of the children are African American, 4% Latina/o, 2% Asian American, and 2% Anglo European. The children's families represent a diversity of two and one-parent families, large extended families, teenage parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. Approximately 65% of the families' yearly income falls below the federal poverty line, 75% of the children remain in attendance at the preschool for two years, and 80% attend kindergarten in the district.

The school's 6 head teachers and 12 instructional assistants share the 7:30 a.m. to 5:45 p.m. instructional day. 15 teachers are African American, 3 are Anglo European, and the average age of the veteran, experienced staff is approximately 55 years of age. The majority of the staff has taught at the preschool site for at least ten years, and as longtime members of the nearby neighborhoods from which the school draws its students, the teachers are knowledgeable of the community's concerns and expectations regarding the role of preschool education.

Employing participant-observation and qualitative-based methods for data collection and analysis (Erickson, 1986; Genishi, 1982; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982), the ongoing project examines the following questions:

1) What does the notion of "literacy as community" look like in an urban preschool?

2) What are successful ways to create an extra "layer of literacy," and how does this influence the process of literacy as community in a preschool?

3) How is the process of literacy community-building tied to notions of literacy teaching and learning as social practice, and how can literacy as community contribute to early childhood program reform?

Data collection occurs twice a week, and data are collected in the form of field notes, audiotapes, student literacy products, and informal interviews highlighting the multigenerational perspectives and personal biographies (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) of teachers and parents. To particularize and generalize the project's findings, future data representation will feature case studies (Merriam, 1988; Lightfoot, 1978) of selected teachers, children, and parents.

The Rural Study

The rural study analyzed two Head Start classrooms that represented an effective approach to a model of teaching and learning that focused on what the children brought to school, rather than working against elements they were seen to "lack." These teachers aimed to bring children into contact with experience, with language, and with the classroom environment in ways that enabled the children to more readily and explicitly relate what they know to what they were learning. Through their own personal theories of teaching (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 81) and through the articulation of these theories in practice, they readied the children for kindergarten in important

ways: a) the children become familiar with books, concepts, and tools or materials b) the children's talk was open, expressive and comprehensible; c) the children began to build a base of social skills which would transfer from the Head Start to the kindergarten. Most important, however, is that by the time the children left the Head Start, they were "primed for learning." In the words of one teacher:

> After they've been here for a year...the importance of the whole concept of learning will not be foreign to them. Instead of spending three weeks adjusting--or five weeks adjusting--to going to kindergarten, it'll take them two weeks, so they can have three weeks of enjoyment instead of three weeks of adjustment.

In this study, then, the aim was to answer the following questions:

> 1. How do teachers implement their notions of developmentally-appropriate preschool curricula in ways that respond to the needs of the community of children in their classroom?
>
> 2. How do the teachers' interactions with the children structure the children's thinking and interaction with others to extend their capabilities in ways that will prepare them for the kindergarten experience?

Data were collected through videotaped observersations in two Head Start classrooms in a small Midwestern town: one morning program and one afternoon program. Each class operated for three hours, the entirety of which was observed twice each week for six weeks. Graphic products (i.e., drawings or writing) completed by the children were Xeroxed. In addition, audiotaped interviews were conducted with each teacher in order to understand the teachers' articulations of their own views of classroom practice based on activities observed in the classrooms.

In all, 31 children (16 from the morning class and 15 from the afternoon) participated in the study. The children in the two classrooms ranged in age from 4:11 to 5:11 at the end of their pre-kindergarten year in

Head Start. The children came primarily from low-income families, many receiving social services. The ethnic background of 30 of the children in the two classrooms was Anglo; one child was of African-American descent. In each classroom, between fourteen and sixteen children were present on any given day.

Both of the teachers held Master's Degrees in education and had at least ten years of previous classroom experience. In addition, one teacher aide and one parent volunteer were present daily in each classroom. In the morning class, a second teacher aide was present frequently. In this completed study, the analyses rested on qualitative data obtained through classroom observations and teacher interviews. Throughout, the goal was to clarify patterns of activity which would lead to a "comprehensive description and interpretation of meaning" of the activity in the two classroom which were observed (Genishi, 1982, p. 584). In other words, the goal was not to code a set of variables in such a way that they could be quantitatively examined, but to describe regularities in classroom practice in terms of their day-to-day enactment between teachers and children. This permitted the identification of actual classroom strategies that led to a definition of developmentally-appropriate practice for this community of children.

A process of qualitative analysis was used to clarify patterns of activity in the two classrooms. The basic unit of analysis was the learning event, defined as a specific engagement in which the participants' activity maintained a focus on an identifiable social and/or cognitive purpose. This provided an opportunity for the development of attitudes, processes, and skills.

Findings and Analysis

The Urban Study

The addition of extra "layers of literacy" at the urban preschool has altered existing literacy practices at the preschool for teachers, children, and families. In the process of literacy as community building, three themes are emerging: professional negotiation and a sense of ownership between teachers, literacy as extension for the children's families, and a sense of literacy engagement for the children.

Professional Negotiation and a Sense of Ownership. The participant-observer started the implementation of a home-school bookbag program for all 3-5 year olds at the preschool. The proposal was accepted by the school's staff, the participant-observer implemented the program by organizing the bookbags and filling the bags with new books twice a week. The teachers agreed to help sign up parents for the program, and to facilitate the returning and sending of the bookbags twice a week.

In the first phase of implementing the bookbag program, teachers relayed certain complaints from the parents. For instance, parents were sometimes confused as to when to bring the books back and that their child received the same book twice in a week. As a solution to early tensions between teachers and parents, teachers suggested a central place to house the bookbags for a more efficient book return and checkout system. One teacher constructed and decorated a box for her room, adding an envelope on the side for "notes to Mr. Meier." Taking her cue, the participant-observer made drop-off boxes for the other two classrooms. This helped facilitate the collection of the bookbags, and improved the chances of the children not receiving the

same book twice, and reduced some parental complaints and teacher-parent tensions.

In the second phase of program implementation, the participant-observer sent out a questionnaire to the teachers. None was returned, and a meeting with the teachers was scheduled. The teachers said that they liked the program overall and wanted it to continue. They also wanted certain procedural changes to occur such as decreasing the number of days for turning in the bookbags from two days a week to one. The participant-observer and the teachers also discussed ways to decrease the number of lost bookbags and books, which prompted a discussion on teaching both children and parents a sense of responsibility. The teachers finally decided to add a small monetary amount to the parent permission slip for lost items.

The home-school reading program influenced a change in the existing literacy patterns and practices at the preschool, which in turn created a set of tensions between the participant-observer, teachers, parents. In order to resolve the tensions, the teachers entered a process of professional negotiation to make the program more responsive to the needs and expectations of teachers and parents and develop a sense of collective ownership.

A Literacy Extension for Families. Of the 91 total children in the preschool (46 boys, 45 girls), 67 children (29 boys, 38 girls) were enrolled by their parents in the bookbag program. In terms of the average number of books read per month, girls outnumbered boys by a 2:1 margin. In informal conversations with the participant-observer, parents expressed their satisfaction with the program, commenting on how much the program spurred on their children's interest in books and reading, and how they liked the structure and organization of the program. In one formal parent meeting

regarding the bookbag program, fifteen parents attended the meeting and represented a cross-section of the school's families. Except for one parent, all the parents were mothers and grandmothers. The participant-observer had originally scheduled the meeting as an informational session to review and discuss the book check-in procedures and answer parent questions regarding the program in general. There were no procedural questions; instead, the discussion centered on an exchange of ideas about ways to read with preschool-aged children.

For instance, as the participant-observer showed certain books read at school and discussed ways to read with children, the parents spontaneously shared their experiences about reading at home with their children and offered their ideas for making the home-school reading program a valuable experience and one beneficial for their children's academic success in school. Several parents commented that they liked to find "a quiet place" to read with their child, and tried to set up a regular time to read the books. One parent said that she made the book reading like "homework" so that her child knew that it was serious schoolwork. Another parent said that she had her child look for certain words in the books, trying to read them and build up a reading vocabulary.

The families tended to view the home-school book reading program as a literacy extension of the overall goals and aims of preschool — to improve children's education and chances for school success during the preschool years and beyond. In informal conversations and formal meetings, the thrust of parental concerns and hopes for their children did not center on making the home book reading an enjoyable and fun activity or solely a shared social activity designed to promote a social closeness with their child. Rather, preliminary analysis points to a parental view of the book reading program as

a serious, valuable complement and extension not only to their children's preschool experiences but as a foundation for their later elementary school work.

A Sense of Literacy Engagement. The third layer of literacy focuses on the children's small group engagement with literacy activities. Working with small groups of the four-year-olds, the participant-observer engages the children in a three-part session involving guided reading, group literacy activities, and independent reading. Early analysis indicates that the interrelated and scaffolding nature of this event promotes an additional sense of literacy as community among the children.

In the guided reading, the participant-observer reads and shares varied books with the children. The emphasis is on close engagement with early reading experiences involving genres (alphabet, counting), characters (Huggles, Hairy Bear), variety (flap, board, big), content (fiction, nonfiction, family, friends), language pattern and structure (wordless, repetitive, additive). As in work carried out in the KEEP program (Au & Jordan, 1981), the small group format encourages more active verbal and nonverbal participation than allowed for in whole-class story time events. In reading *Molly Bang's 10, 9, 8* , for example, the children were asked to keep an eye on the black cat who moves in the pictures. At one point the participant-observer asked, "How does the cat move from picture to picture?" The small group format allowed one child, Tashawn, to answer the verbal query not with a verbal response, but with a physical answer: "Like this," he said, and he got down on the floor and demonstrated the movement of a cat.

In working on literacy activities, children are involved in drawing, bookmaking, drama, storytelling, dictation. Talk and social interaction is encouraged, and the participant-observer's is less directly involved. In their

drawing, children both extend elements of the guided reading and also contribute content and skills from their home and community life. As Lawerance, Demetri, and Paris drew, Demetri said, "I have two Power Ranger puzzles."

Paris: I'm about to make a face.
Lawerance: What you making?
Paris: A girl. Demetri, look it.
(Demetri, engrossed in drawing and looking at the Eyewitness shark book in front of him, didn't respond)
Paris: He'll (the shark on the page) gobble you up.
Lawerance: Sharks is not real in books.
Demetri: They're real at Marine World (animal theme park). Marine World is going to be bad (on imminent school trip).
Lawerance: The last time I went to Marine World with my granny, I saw an elephant.

As the children bring their sociocultural resources and their personal experiences to bear on their literacy activities, the open-ended and "permeable" (Dyson, 1993) nature of the event further promotes the "child collective" (Bruner, 1986) and a sense of evolving "peer culture" (Corsaro, 1975).

In the third part of small group work, independent reading, the children explore and share the books on their own, with classmates, or with the participant-observer. Children are encouraged to re-experience the books from guided reading as well as a variety of additional books. In their playing with texts (Meek, 1985), the children engage in a kind of dialogic wrestling with texts, pictures, and associations over time (Bakhtin, 1986). Jeremy and Gary looked at *Quick as a Cricket*, and each holding the book with one hand, they used their other hand to point and gesture to the book's characters. "OK," Jeremy said, "I'll be the shark and you be the boy." Looking next at a big book of dinosaurs, Jeremy said, "I'm him! I'm him! I'm him!" To which Gary replied, "You can't be three of them!" In exchanging and taking on roles

and characters in books, Jeremy and Gary gain early experience in comprehending, controlling, and manipulating literary elements through self-guided social interaction with peers (Vygotsky, 1978).

Early findings, then, indicate that the small group format allows for a set of instructional and interactional routines promoting an increased familiarity and knowledge of a range of children's books, involvement with selected aspects of literacy negotiation and engagement, and extended opportunities for social interaction and talk with peers around books and literacy activities. In these ways, the small group literacy work adds another layer of literacy to the overall process of literacy community-building.

The Rural Study

Interactions to Structure Thinking. Both Head Start teachers stated a goal of enriching group social skills as one of the essential aspects of kindergarten preparation. In part, this meant helping the children to become more familiar and more willing to follow certain classroom routines, to share, to learn politeness routines and phrases, and to get along with others. More than this, however, both teachers also fostered a sense of inclusion, or membership in the classroom community, in the children (a) through activity structures that helped children to feel that their individual presence and contribution to the activity was important and (b) through conversation which fostered a sense of belonging, as well as language enrichment. The following three foci characterize classroom interactions which developed the children's thinking in the literacy communities of these two classrooms: inclusion, ownership, and thinking processes.

Inclusion. A sense of inclusion was fostered in these classrooms by means of the setting and organization of classroom activity, such as an informal "book time" that followed lunch in the afternoon class. As children

finished their lunches, they each selected a book to read with the teacher, the teacher aide, a parent volunteer--or to read with another child. Pairs and groups of children and adults would then settle on the floor, at the playhouse table, on a beanbag chair, or in the rocking chair to experience reading:

> [Daniel approaches his teacher as she sits in the rocking chair reading Green Eggs and Ham. Delon is in her lap. The teacher gestures toward Daniel as she emphasizes part of a phrase, which she repeats as Jesse and Sam come to the other side of the chair, having put up their lunch trays.]
>
> Jesse (looking at the book): We tried that before!
> Teacher: Yes we did try that before..."I do--I like green eggs and ham."
> Nora (points to the book): He ate one of them!
> Teacher: He ate one, didn't he.
> Jesse (glancing at the teacher's feet): You got big feet!
> Teacher (nods at Jesse): "I will eat them here or there..I will eat them everywhere."
> Jack: That was a good book.
> Teacher: Wasn't that a good book?
> Delon: That was a GOOD BOOK.
> Teacher: It was a good book, Delon.

This kind of opportunity to sit in the teacher's lap and listen to a story being read helps all dimensions of moving comfortably into literacy. Wells (1985) found that listening to a story being read or told from a book was significantly associated with knowledge and literacy and with reading comprehension ability. This kind of exposure to literacy helps the development of the child's familiarity with ways in which language is used in written, as opposed to spoken, communication. Story reading also introduces children to a situation in which language alone is used to create experiences. Since language becomes more and more central to learning as children progress in school, Story reading in preschool provides essential preparation for a style of teaching that is frequently part of later school experiences.

In addition, however, the teachers' comments in the context of story reading activities in these Head Start classrooms helped to bring the children into the social group. The teachers used open-ended questions that focused on what the children knew and were interested in, and which enabled both children and adults to share what they knew in the culture of learning that was created in these classrooms. Thus, socialization for kindergarten also encompassed the development of a positive self-concept as well as a readiness to learn. As one teacher put it:

> If they're socially--feel good about themselves, if the home is consistent and the children feel that school's important at home--that kind of thing...they just need the readiness skills--ready to learn which, all of these children have this.

And yet, the development of a healthy self-concept battled with what one of the teachers identified as a lack of consistency in the home experiences of many of the children. This resulted in an inability to trust in the consistency of day to day experience as well as the consistency of human behavior. As one of the teachers put it:

> When they first come in, because they've been on the street and this--another new experience is not gonna get them, you know. The bad thing on that is that they have so many things that we have to overcome...Because they have this defense mechanism..."I'm not gonna like you because I liked somebody and they let me down," you know, that kind of thing.

In response, the teachers made an effort to remain consistent in attitude, social behavior, classroom routine and enforcement of rules throughout the year. In this way, the teachers in these classrooms structured the socio-emotional environment of the children in ways that made the world more dependable for them:

> I just try to be the same everyday and whether they come in up, down, cross-eyed, I just try to be happy and glad to see them...and I try to deal

> with the discipline exactly the same way: I have my rules...one day I'm not gonna say it's OK and the next day I'm gonna say it's not OK.

The structure of the social environment was thus linked in concrete ways to the affective world of the children both through activity and through teacher response. The teachers also helped the children to feel and exercise control over their school environment in ways that helped create a sense of ownership.

Ownership. Both Head Start teachers also fostered the children's sense of ownership of their projects and the processes through which the children themselves constructed their self-initiated projects. The importance of such a sense of ownership relates to teacher comments reflecting the view that many of the children they serve often learn to be very independent at home, out of necessity. As one of the teachers put it, "...independence is not a big deal because a lot of them have been pretty much ón their own for a long time."

Both teachers built on this perceived independence through skillful comments that fit well with the children's own sense of the world as a place in which one directed oneself and yet extended this competence into the new realm of the school and the materials that the children encountered there. These materials themselves could be put to use in ways that, in turn, extended the children's problem-solving abilities as well as their creative thinking skills in very inventive and self-directed ways. For example, in the following vignette Delon has self-initiated a project in which he is making a present for his mother at the art table. He is using large white paper, bits of construction paper and scotch tape. At one point, he goes over to his mailbox in the classroom and pulls out a toy, which he attempts to tape to his paper. An adult comes over to him.

Teacher aide: Do you want your name on that?

[She leans down and write his name on the paper, then leaves and passes by again, a few minutes later.]
Teacher aide: No--Delon--that won't stick on there. It's a little heavy. You need to find something else.
[Teacher aide brings Delon a paper horse to tape onto his picture. Delon begins to tape the horse onto his paper. He then folds his paper and she helps him, making it neater.]
Delon: I want a envelope.
Teacher: (watching) Ah-ah-ah--Delon--remember? It's Delon's project. He can write his own name, too.

The teacher's comment here confirmed the child's ownership of both his product and of the process that he had devised in order to accomplish this. Similarly, a child who was making a collage asked for help in gluing a piece of paper to her work. Her teacher commented: "If I help you, it won't be your picture." Then, after watching the child's progress for a short time, the teacher added a follow-up comment: "What a good idea! A little glue for a little piece of paper!" This comment both verbalized and confirmed the strategy that the child had devised. Such comments also worked toward focusing the children's attention on the kinds of thinking processes that they were learning to use.

Thinking Processes. In contrast to some early childhood programs which are labeled "compensatory" or "remedial" in nature (Polakow, 1993), the activity in the classrooms observed in the course of this study did not focus on lower-order skills before the contextualized use of thinking processes was permitted to come into play. One teacher commented on the inclusion of cognitive foci as a part of everyday routines and so as a natural part of the curriculum:

> We try to intertwine a lot together. So it's not that we're putting away blocks, it's that we're putting away--these blocks that are the same go here and these blocks that are the same go here and we're putting the red tubes in this row and this picture matches so this goes here--it's the same.

Thinking processes are thus couched in activity that is useful and familiar instead of being presented in terms of isolated skills sequences that mean nothing to the child. As Piaget put it, "Learning that is not the result of the child's own activity will be deformed" (Piaget, cited in Duckworth, 1964). By the time the children leave the Head Start Program, the teachers feel that they know their numbers, at least some of the alphabet, and that they have an attention span which is appropriate to their age level and to the activities that they will encounter in kindergarten. But the base in the Head Start classroom has to be social as well as cognitive if it is to help children. As one teacher explained it:

> By the end of the kindergarten year, most of the kids would have figured out letters and numbers in books anyway. But this--after they're been here a year, they're going in maybe not knowing letters and numbers but primed to soak 'em up. The importance of the concept--the whole concept of learning--then will not be foreign to them.

Beyond this, however, these teachers both modeled and provoked the use of higher-level thinking processes through the skillful use of questions in their interactions with the children throughout the day--even in casual conversations:

> Philip: Why are the toys all out?
> Teacher: Why do you think the toys are all out.
> Philip: Cause they're out?
> Teacher: Why?
> Philip: Where are the toys?
> Teacher: Why are they gone?
> Philip: Cause they're broken?
> Teacher: That's an idea but that's not why they're gone...what did we do today.
> Philip: A special program.
> Teacher: Why did we put 'em away...who came for a special program?
> Philip: Moms!
> Teacher: You mom, remember? Your mom came for our program. Cause it's the last day before our vacation.

This kind of questioning in response to the children's questions extended to activities in which children were manipulating materials and needed to make decisions about how to proceed:

[Jesse has cut out a 3"x5" rectangle of paper which he brings to the teacher.]
Jesse: Help me--help me write um--(gives father's first, middle, and last name).
Teacher: Right on here? Can you make a "J"..."E"..."S"?
[Jesse has run off the corner of the small piece of paper. He holds up the paper, pointing to the corner with his marker.]
Teacher: OK...that's OK...your daddy will like it..he'll be happy that you tried to make his name.
Jesse: (inaudible)
Teacher: Maybe you need a big piece of paper...what do you think.

This use of the question, "What do you think?" along with the suggestion to use a larger piece of paper--instead of telling the child to simply select a larger piece of paper--provides the child with an option he is clearly not able to consider yet. Still, the choice is based on the child's evaluation of his product and use of his spatial reasoning ability to make a decision. On a socio-emotional level, the child is also making the decision to change what he is doing: he is choosing the alternative, not the teacher.

In terms of kindergarten preparation, this ability to make choices which will direct their independent activity will serve the children well. In addition, the teachers in these classrooms modeled thinking strategies for the children which will help them to learn problem-solving skills and create stability in their own everyday classroom activity.

Structure for Stability. The teachers in the two Head Start classrooms agreed that the basic thrust of Head Start is social competence. "The base has to be social," said one of the teachers. In the view of these teachers, the children bring a highly independent kind of coping strategy to the school, the teachers have found ways to build on this independence while providing

structure in the new environment of the school. This enables children to feel useful and needed, instead of feeling overwhelmed by the classroom.

One way in which the teachers did this was to use language to enhance the children's ability to appreciate the value and utility of certain classroom rules, and to help the children take a hand in structuring their own environment. This was apparent in situations in which children engaged the teachers with questions involving decisions about the activities they were conducting. For example, one child had self-initiated a project at the art table in which he began to construct a card or gift for his mother using markers, large paper, tape, and construction paper.

[Sam walks up to the art table and looks on the plastic shelves there for paper.]
Sam (surprised): There's no more paper!
[Teacher opens her mouth in mock surprise.]
Teacher: Well what are we gonna do about that! We have some big pieces of paper or I can get some more little ones.
Sam: Big.
Teacher: Big. (She points.) Back on the counter by the (??) paper.
Sam: Where are the scissors.
Teacher: Right here--or it's s'posed to be in that can, isn't it? It's not.
Sam: I need the scissors...scissors!
Teacher: I know..see when people don't put things away, then we have a hard time findin' 'em, don't we.
Philip: Yup.
Teacher: Yup..that's why we put 'em away when we're done.

Through these kinds of comments the teachers provided the children with narrative explanations--and not dictates or orders--that immediately clarified the purposes and benefits of taking care of classroom materials and keeping them in order. Blame was not a part of this process, so that these kinds of interchanges helped to give the children a positive sense of personal responsibility (as well as inclusion) in the community of the classroom where materials were shared by everyone and maintained by everyone.

One of the bolts in the classroom "driver" has come loose. Instead of fixing it herself, the teacher gets nuts and bolts and shows Philip how to push the bolt through the nut, put on the washer, and turn the nut until it is tight. She then leaves the area.

> Philip: I need some help!
> Teacher: I'll get the wrench and you can tighten it.
> The teacher watches Philip and narrates his experience.
> Teacher: You put the wrench like this on the nut, turn it, then let it go. [watching Philip] There you go! You're using the wrench to tighten the nut...now...down and around...oh that's good. That's nice and tight...now we hafta do this top one so we have the other side.

The teacher's verbal narration of Philip's experience coupled talk with physical work that helped the child to structure his activity. This also provided a sense of structure for personal responsibility, responding to a teacher perception of one of the aspects of the children's home lives: "Some of these children live in utter chaos...and some of them live in very small spaces. And the space of this place is overwhelming."

By helping children to have control over parts of this new environment of school, routines became more familiar, materials belonged to everyone, and rules were clearly necessary as a way of respecting the rights of others. In addition, the classroom also functioned as an environment in which the children were able to contribute to real, daily activity in useful and needed ways--even passing out napkins and straws for lunch, cleaning up their own lunch trays, sweeping the floor.

Conclusions

> A classroom for a young child is a life world; each year brings new forms of power, of possibility, of despair. As educators we are responsible for making school a place in which a child matters--a place away from the edges. (Polakow, 1993, p. 162)

The life of the preschool as shown and enacted in these two projects both moves closer to and draws from the life of the child. In the urban study, adding layers of literacy contributes to an expanding sense of literacy as community involving teachers, children, and families. In doing so, changes in the existing literacy patterns and practices are carried out in response to the particular social and academic needs and expectations of the participants of the preschool community. The ongoing success of building a literacy community, then, is connected to the local contexts, practices, and expectations for literacy teaching and learning.

In the rural study, the way of envisioning and implementing appropriate practice relies on the skills and insights of these teachers, who incorporate a research perspective into their teaching by being expert observers of how children approach, select, and accomplish tasks. These teachers listen to what the children say, know what the children give attention to, understand what they fear. This approach creates a comfortable base of oral communication that succeeds in weaving the children's own experiences into the classroom interchanges that frame the learning that takes place here. In this way, the experience of school becomes intrinsic to the children's activity and development. Learning becomes a familiar feeling and not a threatening one, so that children will be able to move into kindergarten from a position of both cognitive and social readiness. Thus, a

very social and human network is at the heart of the approach which is effectively used in these classrooms.

In order to add to the quality of early childhood programs, and drawing from findings from both projects, greater use might be made of the writing and drawing materials that are readily available in the classrooms. In the context of the story-reading that is so effectively incorporated into the programs, children might respond to the stories they have read by telling or drawing/writing their own interpretations of these stories. These child-originated stories need not be restricted to exact retellings of trade-book stories, but might spring from a particular image or even from a word that an individual child finds intriguing. In the context of these child-created writing products and purposes, teachers might help focus attention on inducing patterns in the print environment that the children themselves create.

Second, some additional orientation might be offered for parents in the process of shared story-reading (Holdaway, 1979; Chow, Dobson, Hurst & Nucich, 1992). This would help to enrich the adults' reading experiences with their own children and with children in the classroom. Parents might (a) observe teachers' story-reading processes, (b) participate with their children in dramatizing stories, or (c) help the children to draw or write their own stories. In doing this, parents and teachers could share comments about what they noticed during the course of these literacy events, for example, what the child's comments revealed about how he or she sees himself or herself, why the child was comfortable with one particular character, whether the child's interpretation of the story used more physical movement or more talking, or whether adult and child talked about the story more in the car during the week.

Another way in which programs might continue to successfully direct teacher practice relates to what has been discussed in the academic literature as "escalation of curriculum" (Shepard & Smith, 1988) or "academic trickle down" (Cunningham, 1988). Thus, in many schools, "the kindergarten program of today incorporates the content of the first grade of yesterday" (Graue, 1993, p. 252). As a result, less time may be spent on socialization skills. The focus may be less on play with materials such as paints and blocks, while more time is spent on teacher-directed activities and worksheets, which rely primarily on language, both oral and written, as the medium for learning.

It is important to examine the assumptions that underlie the conceptualization of "readiness" in the kindergartens which these children will attend: is practice there based on measured readiness scores or is it viewed as a social meaning? An assessment of such practices which is made available to teachers would help in avoiding unequal educational outcomes for children; for example, a subgroup of children is sometimes arbitrarily put at risk because of the readiness-related practices of others. This would be the case if young five or six year-olds are viewed as unready because an increasing number of six year-olds appear in kindergarten (Graue, 1993).

In the effort to understand the processes that work in classrooms serving all children, what is needed is not remediation of children's behavior or intervention to prevent academic failure, but early childhood programs that provide more children with what the children in these classrooms have experienced: adding layers of literacy in the process of literacy community-building, adult listeners who know the child's world and who pay attention to what the child has to say, situations that allow books and pencils and paper to become more familiar as tools of expression, and verbal and physical

contexts that also promote the expression and exchange of ideas and of what the child wants to share. Given the need for varied starting points for extending children's competencies, and the need for parents themselves to take an active role in extending literacy teaching in preschools, early childhood programs can benefit from the kinds of literacy community-building and authentic teacher response and teacher practice as exemplified in these studies.

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